

A Special Rage

By Gilbert Moore.

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By JAN CAREW

Talleyrand once said that "treason is a matter of timing," and this is certainly true of the Black Panthers who, between 1967 and 1971, have ceased to be symbols of terror and have become contentious voices in the political wilderness. Of the three books about the rise and fall of the Panthers considered here—"Panthermania" by Gail Sheehy, "Look for Me in the Whirlwind" by the New York 21 and Gilbert Moore's "A Special Rage"—Moore's book is by far the best. The other two, although they strive to be topical and to give new insights into the dramatic emergence and decline of a unique black revolutionary movement, deserve little more from the reader than a mildly affectionate disregard.

Gail Sheehy, on the strength of a fellowship in Interracial Reporting from Columbia University, and with a black photographer as a collaborator, made a quixotic sally into a black community that had long been discreetly submerged in the shadow of Yale's dreaming spires. "Panthermania" is the result of Sheehy's excursion into the regions between "New Haven's two hubs . . . the castle garden encircled by garret tops and gargoyles leaping off the turrets of a great university . . . courtyards of autonomous Oxonian colleges" and "Congoland . . . a wedge of streets which form the core of New Haven's seven inner-city neighborhoods." The hidden theme of "Panthermania" is really the Panther trial in New Haven where "Twelve men and women assumed to be Black Panthers, including Chairman Bobby Seale, were charged in different degrees with the kidnapping, torture and murder of Alex Rackley, a member of the New York Panther chapter."

The author concentrates on the events around the trial and attempts

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Above, opening day of the Lonnie McClucas trial, New Haven, June, 1970. Top, Huey Newton at pre-trial press conference, Alameda County Jail, 1968.

with more enthusiasm than insight to monitor the reactions of the black community in New Haven and to tell the reader, inadvertently, about her own reactions to black and white revolutionaries. Ericka Huggins, leader of the New Haven Panthers, is described as "high-spirited, super-black . . . tall, angry, insistent"; Angela Davis, we are told, has an "electric Afro"; then on the West Coast was "Karenga's goon squad of 18-year-olds trained in soul sessions to fight Swahili style"; and to bestow upon the whites their share of malice, Abbie Hoffman, the author tells us, "interchangeably shilled grass, revolution and release from Whitemiddleclass Paralysis."

The author has a gift for juxtaposing opposites, black and white, old and young, liberal and revolutionary, the bourgeoisie and the brothers on the street corner, but the creative insights that should make the tensions born of the clash of these opposites spring to life, persist in eluding her.

The single exception is when she describes John Huggins's death in a U.C.L.A. fracas as seen through the eyes of Mentor Jones, a black teen-

ager from New Haven, one of the leading characters in the book: "John with a ragged dum-dum hole through his chest . . . still able to lift a gun out of his belt by sheer force of training in self-defense. Able to squeeze that trigger again and again in postmortem spasms. This was really it! A half-dead black man and his weapon united in a choreography so exquisite, so instinctual, that the two blasted on beyond death." Here is a flash of that archetypal dream of the hero-cowboy with the smoking gun claiming his place in a frontier Valhalla. Only, in this case, the hero is a Black Panther, someone with whom a black 15-year-old character can identify completely, and the frontier is an invisible one separating the inner city from the white man's world.

But a single flash of insight cannot redeem Gail Sheehy's book. Gossip column tit-bits and malice without wit triumph in the end.

"Look for Me in the Whirlwind" is an abortive work conceived with a surfeit of good intentions, but what emerges after an all too brief intellectual and creative gestation is an instant book. Its authors, 16 in all,

manage to sound like one man. In the introduction you are assured that "you smell the smells, see the sights, hear the sounds, and feel the horror." Nothing of the kind is experienced, however, for the material has obviously been assembled hastily, and the editor, with a remarkable absence of imagination, manages to make the most exciting stories sound banal and to achieve a tone so monotonous that it borders on whining. What one ends up with is not so much the moving individual story as a collection of case histories that rushes one through a collective childhood, adolescence and a tragic adulthood; and in the process one catches out-of-focus glimpses of the courts, the police, the ghetto youths pacing pavements of destruction, the people living in stinking cruel tenements with rats and rotting wood.

The case histories become a cacophony of voices chorusing their protest so loudly that one is deafened and slightly irritated in the end, not so much by the content as the clamorous disharmony. One feels, as one reads, that there should be a profound message somewhere in this collection of varied life stories, but one searches in vain for it.

Gilbert Moore's "A Special Rage" is well researched, well written and superbly understated. He begins his book with a modest autobiography tinged with irony and bereft of any traumatic experiences. After graduating from City College and doing a stint in the Army he joined Life magazine as a reporter. He tells us that he accepted Life's Black Panther assignment "with great reluctance. . . . The Panthers had not yet thrust themselves into national infamy, so the very fleeting impression I had of them was they were a bunch of California niggers, talking bad and occasionally shooting someone. . . . I remember fearing that they would be a West Coast version of the Blackstone Rangers of Chicago," but, although "they sprang from the same roots, [they] could not have been more different."

Moore, in his book, sees the Black Panthers as a living extension of the black people's awakening, and if their particular movement fails he is convinced that the awakening will continue. The author has an inner ear for the community out of which the Panthers emerge, the language, the culture, the dreams and the expectations. He is therefore able to remain unperturbed by the violent rhetoric and the histrionics.

Of the 30 Panthers who invaded the California Legislature he writes: "They were not the one nigger in a 100 that goes to Princeton. . . . These were not slick cocktail niggers shooting down slick white chicks at parties [or] country club niggers with African goatskin rugs and bull—dashikis and oily elbows to hide the ashy skins." Rather "these were the cats that (Continued on Page 16)



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hang out at pool halls where mean mother—s kick ass just to stay in shape. These were niggers that get their heads slammed up against the wall at three o'clock in the morning by the police looking for niggers to slam up against the wall." These were the blacks that erupted onto the national stage, and remained there until internecine struggles began to rend their movement.

They had the élan of outlaws and a dramatic flair. "If a Hollywood director," a page-one story in The San Francisco Chronicle said, "were to choose them as stars of a movie melodrama of revolution, he would be accused of typecasting." And the article continues: "The leader is 25-year-old Huey Newton, a Negro who doesn't use that word but calls himself black. . . . [What man in his right mind would call himself black?]"

The Panthers dramatized the relationships between the police and the poor. They "had the temerity to begin patrolling the police," Huey Newton described a typical patrol at his own murder trial: "If we saw anyone stopped by the police, we would stay a reasonable distance from the person who is stopped by the police. We would have a law book with us to read the person his basic rights."

"A Special Rage" then covers in great detail the first Huey Newton trial. But the most interesting part of this trial is somehow its aftermath when individual members of the jury give their version of what transpired. What came to the fore in their statements was that once the jury retired to decide on Huey Newton's innocence or guilt, then a trial within a trial began to unfold itself. David Harper, a black employee of the Bank of America, was selected as foreman of the jury, and this was a crucial factor in Newton's not being convicted of first-degree murder. He and Joseph Quintana, a Cuban machinist "who didn't speak English very well," were the only jurors who were convinced that on the basis of the evidence Newton was innocent (although one other voted for acquittal).

Of the others Moore writes, "It was simply that these men and women had come to a wall they could not penetrate. Beyond the barrier lay Huey Newton's innocence, and no power of logic, of reasoning, could get them to the other side. Their minds, their hearts were shackled by the powerful certainty that whoever this Huey P. Newton was . . . he was

guilty of something. Call it 'first degree murder' if you will. Call it 'voluntary manslaughter' if you like that name better. Call it any goddam thing you please, but Huey P. Newton is guilty of something.

"I was astounded," Harper said, 'by how they could ignore facts—facts that were staring them in the face—facts that we all had agreed upon.'"

The Black Panthers were urban revolutionaries and, if one compares them to other contemporary movements of the same genre, one cannot help seeing them as a peculiarly American phenomenon. The Naxalites in Bombay and Calcutta, the Tupamaros in Uruguay, the plethora of movements in Brazil and the rest of Latin America are led by highly educated elements who come from the urban middle class. Their base is the army of peasants constantly gravitating from the land to the city. These restless trespassers live in their ghettos inside the city, but they also surround the city. In America the situation is somewhat different. The inner cities are fenced in by skyscrapers and the vast surrounding lands are generally forbidden territories for the urban poor unless they choose to become American-style peons—nomad farm workers with outdated automobiles. So the challenges the Panthers or any other urban revolutionary movement face are formidable.

Gilbert Moore says that the Panthers "wanted, among other things, to be feared. They succeeded in that regard—beyond their wildest reckoning, they succeeded." But fear is a counter-productive political force. It has a habit of afflicting friends and enemies alike. And once the roots of the fear are examined, then the victims of fear became its master.

Moore also says of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale that they "had a raw nerve. Either of them would walk into the mouth of a cannon without flinching," and suggests that they are symbols of a new breed of black youth. He concludes, "I curse them [the Panthers] for raising 10,000 questions and answering none of them. I thank them for wrenching me from political slumber when I was scheduled to die quietly, ineffectually, in my sleep."

Who will succeed the Panthers? It is an interesting question, for the conditions which brought them into being continue to goad not only the minority youth but all the youth of America to a special rage. But Marx said of abortive movements without roots in a broad political base: "History always repeats itself. The first time is tragedy and the next time is farce." ■

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